

Getting on with diversity: ten tips

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The Dutch labour force is becoming increasingly diverse. Ageing, the multi-cultural society, increasing globalisation of trade and industry and various legislation related to work and care, the dismantling of the Disablement Insurance Act and abolition of early retirement and pre-pension regulations, all that is resulting in a different pool of employees on the labour market. Whereas in the past, the breadwinner predominantly was male and white, organisations today have to deal with a diversity of employees and a corresponding diversity of talents, needs and wants. The market for organisations also is diversified. Getting the best out of all employees, while taking their differences and similarities into account in order to keep meeting customer needs and wants is *the* challenge facing the organisation of today.

This article offers a few practical tips for dealing with diversity within your organisation. But first we shall discuss the term diversity and the strategic advantages, which can be obtained.

What is diversity?

Diversity to us means '*all aspects in which people differ from one another*'. This includes both the visible and relatively easily demonstrable personal characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity, as well as the less visible personal characteristics, such as competences, needs and wants, sexual preference, work styles and character traits. Each employee has his or her own, unique combination of such characteristics.

Why should I strive for diversity in personnel?

An often heard argument to avoid having to put energy into diversity is that it only leads to misunderstanding, undesired formation of groups, communication problems and conflicts on the work floor. When put like this, paying attention to diversity seems a useless investment. But demographic developments cannot be ignored. Studies show that from 2007, there will be another labour shortage. In such a situation, organisations cannot permit themselves to exclude a substantial part of the labour force. What is more, diversity in personnel has different advantages pertaining to business economics:

- Attraction for a wider group of customers: more people can identify with your organisation. This could increase your turnover;
- More creativity within your organisation: diversity leads to innovative products and services, which is necessary to compete with other businesses;
- An improved business image: more people see you as an 'employer of choice'.

What is a diversity policy?

A diversity policy is a policy aimed at achieving optimal and lasting usability and productivity of all employees, taking into consideration all their differences and similarities.

Which strategic effects does a diversity policy have?

One effect of a diversity policy is that your personnel will be a true reflection of society. This is good, but not sufficient. The important factor is that it will eventually lead to better business results. A diversity policy contributes to just that in different ways because:

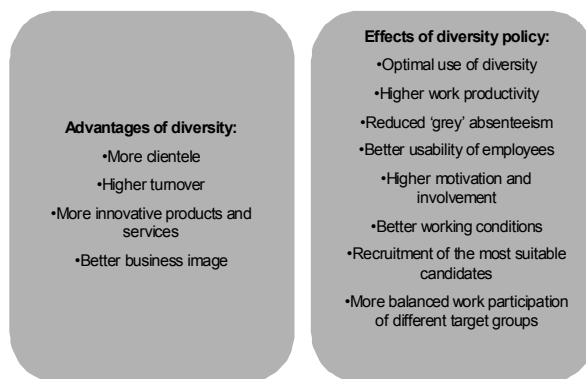
- It takes the different needs and wants of employees into account. This results in more motivated and better usable employees with less absenteeism, which in turn increases labour productivity and reduces undesired turnover of personnel.
- It ensures that the talents of your employees are used in full, resulting in the best products and services;
- It is a concrete form of expressing good employership and socially responsible entrepreneurship. Stakeholders appreciate these efforts. It increases your survival chances;

- It will let your organisation succeed in hiring the best candidates. The ‘pool in which to fish’ for new talent becomes fuller and/or larger. Moreover the number of open applications will rise, since many people will now see you as a more attractive employer.

Is a diversity policy the patch for all wounds?

A diversity policy is, of course, no 'recipe' for guaranteed success. A sophisticated strategy, supplying the right products and services, efficient work processes, etc., are and remain of crucial importance for the success of your organisation. A diversity policy can, given these contexts, optimise the usability of your personnel. It is a means for realising your strategic, tactical and operational objectives.

Figure1: Advantages and effects of diversity and diversity policy summarised



What are critical success factors for a diversity policy?

Critical success factors for a diversity policy exist on organisational level and on the level of the individual managers and employees.

Success factors on *organisational* level are:

- Support by the management. You, as manager, must be aware of the importance of the diversity policy, support and actively implement it;
- A clear vision by the management on diversity. It is important that this vision is based on considerations pertaining to business economics;
- Embedding diversity in the existing policy. Work processes and systems, such as assessment processes, customer relation systems and evaluation mechanisms, do not always allow for diversity. Screening and, where necessary, adapting such processes and systems has a supportive effect for a diversity policy;
- Diversity as an integral part of the planning & control cycle. For example, by including diversity objectives in the annual plan for your business and subsequently evaluating yourself or your managers as to the realisation of these objectives;
- A supportive organisation culture, where more employees feel appreciated, comfortable and recognised in their differences and similarities;
- The putting into practice, measuring and evaluating of diversity parameters is desirable. For it is with this information that the effectiveness of the diversity (policy) can be shown. Interesting figures for example are: employee and customer satisfaction scores, employment figures of physically handicapped and elderly personnel, the number of women or migrant workers in executive positions, etc.. Monitoring and measuring such diversity data often requires the streamlining of management information systems.
- Shared organisational values and standards help your employees to strongly identify with the company. The core competencies of your organisation are also a binding factor for employees.

An important success factor for a diversity policy on *employee* level is the selection and training of employees with regard to certain 'diversity promoting' competencies, such as:

1. (cultural) empathy and understanding;
2. self-appreciation and reflection;
3. having an open mind;
4. a flexible attitude;
5. emotional stability.

An additional advantage is that these competencies mostly also promote the successful functioning in general.

It could well be that not all critical success factors are currently present in your organisation. But this is not necessary. Dealing with diversity is a process of change that entails the gradual development of an organisational culture in which all employees feel at home and are willing to perform excellently.

How do I go about creating diversity?

Ten tips for going about creating diversity are formulated from three perspectives of change.

With regard to changes in *culture and raising awareness*:

1. Hold a strategic brainstorming session about the increasing diversity of employees and society and the effects thereof on realising the company's objectives;
2. Draw up a diversity mission statement. This mission statement is a powerful tool of communication for propagating your vision on the strategic importance of diversity;
3. Follow people management and diversity courses and subsequently set the proper example yourself.

With regard to embedding changes in *organisational policy*:

4. Assess to what extent the existing (personnel) policy does justice to diversity. If necessary, make changes. Let yourself be consulted about issues like equal pay or holding assessment talks with equal opportunity as basis;
5. Select and train employees with regard to the earlier mentioned 'diversity promoting' competencies;
6. Conduct zero and effect measurements of steps aimed at monitoring diversity.

With regard to changes in *behaviour* of managers and employees:

7. Take a critical look at your own procedures and concepts. Which stereotypes do you use subconsciously?
8. Point stereotypes out to co-workers;
9. Discuss the 'diversity promoting' competencies during assessment and functioning talks, in addition to the competencies necessary for performing the function well.

Finally, a tip which forms a good basis for all three perspectives of change:

10. Formulate the challenges and identify your organisation's strong and weak points in the field of diversity management and then, to solve them, connect them with existing problems for which there is support. For this is where you will find the most natural energy for change.

In short, get on with diversity!

Demographic developments are unstoppable. The labour market and consumer market are 'populated' by people of different genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds and so on. Fleeing from diversity is no longer an option ... and thank goodness not necessary. Because diversity works! And is rewarding. While it is true that things don't happen automatically, structural attention to diversity will allow organisations to set 'birds of a different feather' to work and

keep them employed in an efficient and effective manner. With higher turnovers, a larger variety of customers and more innovative products and services on the horizon. What keeps you from turning the impending problems on the labour market into a plus, and by using diversity in time apply your increasingly diverse labour force policy for better results pertaining to business economics? This article hopefully has presented a number of suggestions for making the first step. So: get on with diversity!

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